

The Sioux City Free Speech Fight, 1915



Description of the 1915 free speech fight in Sioux City, Iowa by the IWW. From underground newspaper Free Flowing (July 1977), published out of Ames, Iowa.

*"If you all will shut your trap,
I will tell 'bout a chap,
That was broke and up against it, too for fair;
He was not the kind that shirk,
He was looking hard for work,
But he heard the same old story everywhere;

Tramp, tramp, tramp, keep on a-trampin,
Nothing doing here for you;
If I catch you 'round again,
You will wear the ball and chain,
Keep on tramping, that's the best thing you can do"*

While the writer of this song, Joe Hill, was in prison in Utah, awaiting execution for a crime he did not commit, his fellow workers continued the struggle, singing this song on the streets of Sioux City before being hauled off to jail for exercising their right of free speech. On the way to jail they sang another song, "We will always get some more!" and sure enough, more Wobblies would show up to replace their jailed comrades the next day.

The song also reflects the plight of the unemployed in Sioux City, of whom there were over a thousand during the winter of 1915. Sioux City was a center for migratory agricultural labor, and at the end of the harvest, farmworkers sought refuge from the winter in the nearest city. Though the Sioux City police policy was to force migratory workers to move on as soon as the harvest was over by enforcing vagrancy laws, most of these men had nowhere else to go. While some could find subsistence-level work cutting ice, many depended on missions for their food in winter. But this winter there was another option--the Industrial Workers of the World soup-kitchen at Socialist Hall, where they heard of the possibility of earthly salvation instead of "pie in the sky", as another Joe Hill song put it.

The IWW was formed in 1905 by a diverse collection of American radical leaders from Eugene Debs to Daniel DeLeon to Lucy Parsons, Mother Jones, Bill Haywood and Father Thomas Hagerty. They formed the union to oppose the A.F. of L.'s retreat to the safe representation of skilled workers along craft lines, and sought to organize all workers under the same banner of industrial unionism. Frankly revolutionary in outlook, its preamble read, "Instead of the conservative motto 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work', we must inscribe

on our banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wage system.'" Seeking to organize the unorganized, the IWW's Agricultural Workers Organization brought its campaign to Sioux City in the last months of 1914.

But the immediate problem in Sioux City was unemployment relief. While the citizens of Sioux City debated the merits and disadvantages of various relief plans, the unemployed went hungry--especially after timid citizens withdrew their contributions to the IWW soup line. The IWW preached direct action, and it was time to practice what it preached. On January 5, a delegation of 150 of Sioux City's hungry invaded the posh Commercial Club, much to the astonishment of the town's businessmen, and demanded work.

They were further flabbergasted by the fact that the group had no leaders. Jack Allen, an IWW staff person, told the businessmen, "I am not the organizer. The IWW has no leaders and never will have. And if it does I will quit them." (This really works to confound the ruling class, as veterans of the Farmworker Week picket line at Dahl's will tell you!).

Others applied the IWW logic to the meals set before the club members: "We produced this food these men are going to eat, and why shouldn't we have some of it?" So to the horror of the "Sioux City Journal" reporter, some helped themselves to rolls on their way out. The Commercial Club, in typically American capitalist fashion, appointed a committee to look into unemployment relief.

Direct action got results, though not all results were positive. A day later the city council announced a plan to hire the unemployed grading roads. Eventually over 400 were given jobs in this program. But the invasion of the sanctity of the Commercial Club also produced adverse reaction, as police stepped up "vag" law enforcement, with the express purpose of driving "the undesirable element in the IWW" out of town. The threat of invasion by Wobblies from neighboring locals was enough to make the police back down, however, and the IWW and the police observed an uneasy truce until the end of March.

The city council thought that escalating tactics would drive the IWW out of town. They built a stockade and made arrangements for a rock pile to be imported to keep future prisoners occupied. On March 26, police arrested 14 Wobblies for holding street meetings in which the police were criticized, charging them with vagrancy and disturbing the peace. The battle for free speech was on.

"Come on, you foot-loose rebels, listen to the cry from the jail and grab a handful of rods and get here. We need you!", read the appeal in *Solidarity*. For the next month, the pattern remained the same. IWW members came in from New York and Seattle, from Kansas City and Minneapolis, from Des Moines and Davenport, from Butte and Philadelphia, riding the rails to challenge the Sioux City establishment. Every few days for the next month, the IWW would hold another street meeting, bait the police, and peacefully go off to jail. By mid-April, six hundred to a thousand sympathetic spectators watched the proceedings. Acting police chief Richard had reason to be sensitive about Wobblies calling the police "grafters"; he was only acting chief because the regular chief was on trial for bribery and conspiracy, and was convicted shortly after free speech was won in Sioux City.

Meanwhile, the Wobblies noncooperated in court and in jail. Many refused to plead, take oaths, or remove their hats in the courtroom. When faced with work on a rock pile, they went on strike, and begun a hunger strike as well. To protest their vermin-infested blankets, they tossed them in a pile and set them on fire. Beatings did not dampen their resolve to resist, and the city was at a loss as to how to deal with such behavior. And more Wobblies kept coming--by April 17, 86 had been jailed. Acting police chief Richard resigned in frustration. The local Socialist Party took the lead in demanding freedom for the jailed, printing a leaflet entitled "Let Us Right This Wrong". 57 more IWW members were on their way from Kansas

City, fresh from the union convention, when the new police chief came to an agreement with the Wobblies. Free speech was granted, and the IWW promised to call off its appeal to come fill Sioux City's jails--clearly a victory for the Wobblies and the right of free speech.

The IWW did organize the agricultural workers, until World War I provided the excuse for another and more successful attempt at suppression of the organization. In Sioux City, a Labor Party victory would bring a friendlier city government to power within a few years, led by Wallace Short, who was an unheard-of combination of Congregationalist minister and member of the bartenders' union! But that's another story. If we enjoy basic freedoms in this country, we can thank those who cared for them enough to fight any restrictions on their rights--and we can expect to have to do the same.

Sources: A good short account can be found in Philip Foner's History of the Labor Movement in the United States, volume 4 of which is on the IWW. Also, see Short, Just One American; Sioux Xity Journal; Survey, Oct. 30, 1915; and WPA county guide

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